

Montana ESSER Spotlight

Belt Public Schools

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[Belt Public Schools](#) (Belt), located in central Montana about 20 miles from Great Falls, serves 358 students and consists of one high school, one middle school, one elementary school, and one K-8 school.¹The district received \$879,602 in three rounds in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years from the [Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief](#) (ESSER) fund.

Montana’s Office of Public Instruction (OPI) requested support from REL Northwest to spotlight districts that were using ESSER funds to increase student re-engagement. Using the methods described on Page 3, REL Northwest identified Belt as a district to spotlight and engaged in a structured interview with a district administrator.

Identifying priorities for spending ESSER funds

Belt student achievement data from MAP³ and Renaissance Star⁴ assessments showed that the pandemic compounded already existing achievement gaps. Elementary students were at a particular disadvantage due to school closures in the district. As the district administrator who was interviewed stated,

“[Elementary students] were the ones that we were probably the most concerned about. The other kids have been in school. They know what school is. They have missed some content, but they were probably easier to engage remotely ... whereas primary kiddos, if they’re not in the classroom with their peers, that’s a tough way to learn how to read and write, and how to act in class.”

In consultation with staff and members of the school board, the district prioritized using ESSER funds to provide additional small group instruction during school and increased instructional time after school and in the summer.

Strategies for improving student re-engagement and learning

Belt leadership focused on two main strategies to address students’ academic needs and well-being: 1) hiring additional paraprofessionals, and 2) investing in summer school and after-school programming.

Hiring Additional Paraprofessionals

Belt leadership used ESSER funds to pay for three additional paraprofessionals to increase the contact between instructors and students, *“to give the kids a little more attention, a little more time”* as indicated by the district administrator. The additional support from paraprofessionals allowed students to learn in small groups, which helped boost student re-engagement. Though paraprofessionals primarily serve elementary grades, they also devote time to middle school students.

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ESSER funding received:²

ESSER I: \$54,056

ESSER II: \$261,192

ESSER III: \$564,354

TOTAL: \$879,602



¹Data source: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/school-district-data> as of 3/8/2023.

²Data source: <https://gems.opi.mt.gov/esser> as of 3/7/2023 (see callout box for additional data).

³MAP (Measures of Academic Progress, NWEA): <https://www.nwea.org/map-growth/>

⁴Star Assessments: <https://www.renaissance.com/products/star-assessments/>

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Investing in Summer School and After-School Programming

Belt also used ESSER funds to create a new summer school program and to revive after-school programming, which had existed in the past before funding ran out. Classroom teachers, together with aides and paraprofessionals, designed and facilitated both summer school and after-school programming. The district offered summer school five half-days per week for one month and provided students with breakfast and bag lunches.

Belt also used ESSER funds to tailor its after-school programming to meet the needs of different grade levels. At the elementary level, Belt initially offered broad programming but lacked sufficient staff and resources to support all interested students. In response, the district shifted to “targeted tutoring” of students in most need of support. Thus, rather than supporting pods of 10-12 elementary students, instructors offer an hour of targeted tutoring to 1-3 elementary students with similar educational needs as identified by the district’s Response to Intervention (RTI) system. At the middle school level, Belt structured after-school tutoring as an hour for students to receive help on homework or to just have a quiet space to work. At the high school level, Belt saw the need to use after-school programming to reengage students. The district administrator reflected, *“We saw high schoolers almost needed more of the social interaction part rather than the academic part. The [high schoolers] that are really involved in activities didn’t really have a problem, but we had a group that, during the pandemic, [didn’t] engage much [with activities] and in school. ... We were trying to figure out ways to get them back.”* In response, Belt invested in high school life skills classes held at night. These teacher-sponsored classes were well attended.

Sustaining new strategies after ESSER

Belt aims to retain its newly expanded paraprofessional staff to address student learning needs in future school years. The district is also in the process of identifying which of the new strategies can be absorbed into their other funding streams after ESSER funds are expended. Belt acknowledges it will likely have to eliminate the high school life skills classes and reduce most summer school and after-school programming, as well as middle school tutoring.

Continuing communication with the community

The district administrator interviewed for this spotlight serves as a bridge between staff, the school board, and community members. The administrator uses weekly staff meetings as a vehicle for staff to provide and receive implementation updates. In addition, Belt hosts targeted Response to Intervention meetings with district staff twice per month.

Lessons learned regarding the spending of ESSER funds

The following are key takeaways from the interview with the Belt district administrator regarding the spending of ESSER funds:

- *Invest in infrastructure and staff training for student support.*

The district administrator interviewed attributed much of the district’s success with ESSER funding implementation to Belt already having a robust Response to Intervention (RTI) system to identify levels of student needs. Staff members, he observed, were already equipped to monitor students who needed more individualized attention and direct students to appropriate resources.

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At Belt, having RTI in place meant that teachers, aides, and paraprofessionals used a shared language and processes to execute ESSER-funded interventions effectively and to pivot as needed (e.g., from large group to targeted tutoring) to improve effectiveness.

- *Collect multiple sources of data.*
Prior to the pandemic, Belt already used a robust set of metrics to monitor student progress. These metrics included several standardized tests (e.g., MAP, Star, Smarter Balanced), teachers' observations, and family input through informal parent-teacher discussions. The district administrator interviewed stated that drawing on multiple types and sources of data helped educators more readily identify students who might benefit from more individualized attention.
- *Additional staff are helpful but hard to find.*
Hiring paraprofessionals was key to the district's success, according to the district administrator interviewed. However, because of the difficulties in finding qualified staff, the district administrator expressed that school districts may need to find new ways of maintaining and/or expanding staff capacity, such as investing resources in professional learning to increase workforce capacity.

Methods

To select districts to feature, REL Northwest first examined data from Montana's ESSER Annual Reporting to identify a pool of districts for consideration. To be included in the pool, as of July 22, 2022, districts had to have expended at least 50% or more of their ESSER funds in the "Lost Instructional Time" category.

Districts were then categorized by their student enrollment size and locale (rurality) into one of three types: mid-sized district, small-rural district, and tribal nation district. Next, REL Northwest identified districts that had included evidence-based activities that are likely to directly improve student learning outcomes (e.g., tutoring, student-facing technology investments, after-school programming) in their grant applications to the Montana OPI. REL Northwest then identified 2-3 potential districts that met the above criteria within each type of district. REL Northwest then conducted prescreening interviews with administrators at these districts.

After conducting screening interviews with the district candidates, REL Northwest selected Belt Public Schools (Belt) for the small-rural district, Miles City Unified School District for the mid-sized district, and Arlee Joint School District for the tribal nation district. The final selection of the districts was based on two factors: districts that included student-outcome focused programming in their ESSER plans and of those districts, which ones were far enough along in implementation to share information about their planning phase, implementation phase, and evaluation plans.

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